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Anthony Burns in Canada

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1925

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Anthony Burns in Canada



By

FRED LANDON, M.A.



*Reprinted from the
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1925*

Anthony Burns in Canada

By FRED LONDON, M.A.

The most dramatic fugitive slave case ever fought out in the courts of the United States was that of Anthony Burns. His fate interested millions, he was the cause of riots in Boston and he was returned to slavery in Virginia by the courts of the free state of Massachusetts under circumstances of a strikingly sensational character.

The body of Anthony Burns lies buried to-day in the cemetery at St. Catharines, Ontario, forgotten and neglected save for the attention that it gets from one humble coloured family in that city. In the summer of 1924 the tombstone lay in three pieces, as it had fallen over some time before. But the name of Anthony Burns is not forgotten, nor is it likely to be forgotten while men recall the great issue that divided the United States during the first six decades of the last century and that was settled at last by a long and costly civil war.

The career of Anthony Burns is one well known to students of American history, though probably few Canadians have heard of it. In the year 1850 there was legislation passed by Congress, known as the Fugitive Slave Act,¹ the purpose of which was to enable the owners of runaway slaves to secure their property, wherever it might be found within the bounds of the republic, and return it to the South. There had been other Fugitive Slave Laws before that of 1850, but none so drastic.²

President Filmore signed the bill on September 18, 1850, and at once consternation reigned among the coloured population in the Northern states. Those who were fugitives from the South knew that every effort would be made to track them down, while those who were legally free could not but fear that they might become entangled in the meshes of this new net and find themselves back in a condition of servitude. The consequence of this double fear

¹James Ford Rhodes, the chief American historian of this period, describes the Act as "one of the most assailable laws ever passed by the Congress of the United States. Under this Act of ours, the negro had no chance: the meshes of the law were artfully contrived to aid the master and entrap the slave," History of the United States, Vol. I, pp. 185-6.

²No jury trial was allowed to the negro claimed as a fugitive. Master or agent had simply to present an affidavit before a United States judge or a commissioner, whose fee was doubled if he decided in favour of the claimant. The whole community was bound by the law to come to the aid of the commissioner as a "posse comitatus" to prevent the rescue or escape of the condemned fugitive, and the United States marshal was liable to a fine of \$1,000 and a civil suit for the value of the slave in case the latter got away or was rescued. Finally, the law was *ex post facto* (and therefore unconstitutional) in that it applied to slaves who had fled from their masters at any time—even years before.

was that a movement of negroes into Canada began immediately, and it is estimated that within three months about 5,000 black people had entered the British Dominions.¹

More than any other influence of the time, the Fugitive Slave Act stirred the conscience of the free North to a realization of what slavery actually meant. There was an intense, flaming opposition to the legislation. Men and women openly defied its provisions and some were subjected to imprisonment for so doing. Here and there a whole community would rise in protest against the law, and riots and bloody encounters between abolitionists and slave catchers mark the years after 1850. The sequel of many such an encounter is found in the brief statement that the escaped slave, the cause of the riot, has "gone to Canada."

Anthony Burns was a runaway slave living in Boston in 1854. He had formerly been the property of a Virginian and the latter eventually traced him to his place of refuge. The negro was arrested on the evening of the 24th of May, 1854, and next morning was taken, manacled, to the federal courtroom for examination. Proceedings there would have been of a brief character had not some Boston abolitionists happened to enter the court and there proceeded to set up a defence for the fugitive. The citizens of Boston soon learned by inflammatory handbills and through the newspapers of the court proceedings, and during the following days excitement ran high. A mass meeting of citizens for the purpose of protesting against the law was held in Faneuil Hall on the evening of May 26, and speeches of an inflammatory character were delivered by Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker. These men raised a storm that they found themselves unable to control.² An immediate effect of the excitement raised was the rush of a mob to the jail where Burns was confined, two thousand men being determined to rescue him. The door was broken in and during the tumult one man was killed and several others injured. Two companies of artillery finally cleared the streets.

On the morning of May 29 the trial of Burns was resumed with soldiers on guard against any further violence. Counsel for the fugitive made a strong defence, but law was law and on the 2nd of June it was decreed by Commissioner Loring that the negro should be sent back to his former owner in Virginia.

There came the most dramatic of all the incidents in connection with the case. The public officials were in fear of an attempt at rescue and a large military force was brought in to guard against any violence. The civic police force was reinforced by no less than twenty-two companies of state militia, the streets were patrolled by cavalry, artillery was in evidence and the city as a whole was practically under martial law.

At the appointed hour on the afternoon of June 2 the prisoner was taken from the jail and the parade started in the direction of the harbour, where the

¹For a special study of this movement to Canada see Landon, "The Negro Migration to Canada after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850," *Journal of Negro History*, Jan., 1920, Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 22-36.

²Phillips, says Rhodes, had the manner of Brutus, but his words were like those of Mark Antony, fitted to stir up mutiny. "See to it," he said, "that to-morrow, in the streets of Boston, you ratify the verdict of Faneuil Hall, that Anthony Burns has no master but his God. . . . Nebraska I call knocking a man down, and this is spitting in his face after he is down."

fugitive was to be taken aboard ship and returned to slavery. In the guard that marched that day through the streets of Boston surrounding Burns there was a regiment of artillery, a platoon of U.S. marines, the marshal's civic posse of 125 men close in about the prisoner, two further platoons of marines immediately behind with a field piece, and yet another platoon of marines to guard it.

Boston citizens showed quite emphatically what they thought of the whole business. Along the line of march both store and office windows were draped in black cloth. From a window opposite the old State House was suspended a black coffin on which were the words "The funeral of liberty." Here and there was to be seen the flag of the country reversed as a sign of mourning. It is estimated that 50,000 people stood on the sidewalks and saw the procession pass by. Thousands bared their heads. Hoots and hisses and cries of "Shame!" were frequent. And all this military display was for one lone, friendless negro who passed along somewhat as Marie Antoinette had sat in a cart and passed through the crowded streets of Paris sixty odd years before. But this Boston crowd jeered at the guard while the Paris mob had jeered the royal prisoner. There was a grim spirit abroad in Boston that afternoon. A slight occasion might easily have precipitated a terrible riot. But there was no rioting, no violence, and towards evening the black man was put aboard a revenue cutter headed for slavery. As the boat passed out of the harbour it met another vessel coming in, a great passenger steamer carrying the Southern members of a commercial convention. They crowded the rail to witness the passing of the boat carrying Anthony Burns and their band struck up "The Star Spangled Banner." It was a great day for slavery. The *New York Times* said that it cost the federal government more than \$40,000 to return Burns to slavery, but the *Richmond Whig* put the cost in another way when it said: "We rejoice at the recapture of Burns, but a few more such victories and the South is undone."

The later history of Anthony Burns has a more special interest for Canadians. Shortly after returning to Virginia he was sold to go to North Carolina. Within a few months, however, he was purchased with money that was raised by the Twelfth Baptist Church, of Boston, and its pastor, Rev. L. A. Grimes. Burns had been a member of this church. In 1855, through the kindness of a Boston woman, he secured a scholarship at Oberlin College and went there to study. Mr. Azariah S. Root, librarian of Oberlin College, says that the Oberlin College records show Anthony Burns first enrolled there as a student in 1855, that he continued there during the school year 1855-6, then seems to have been elsewhere for a year. In 1857 he returned and his name continues on the roll until 1862. Oberlin has no other record of his career. It is stated that he was at Fremont Institute for a time. This may have been during 1856-7. For a short time in 1860 he was in charge of the coloured Baptist church in Indianapolis, but was forced to leave by the threat of enforcement of the Black Laws of the state, which would have meant fine and imprisonment for him. It was shortly after this that he decided to come to Canada, where he located at St. Catharines and became pastor of Zion Baptist Church. Here he laboured with much zeal until his death on July 27, 1862.

A communication to a St. Catharines paper at the time of his death speaks in warm terms of his work while in that city. The article in part reads as follows:

"On Monday last, the mortal remains of the Rev. Anthony Burns, pastor of the colored Baptist church of this town, were conveyed to their last resting place, the St. Catharines cemetery. It is several months since the deceased was prostrated with disease, but it was not thought that the end was so near or that his labors were to have so abrupt a termination. The best medical aid was procured, but that most uncompromising and wasting disease, consumption, had taken a fast hold of him and all that human skill could do failed to wrest the sufferer from its grasp. . . . He had been here only a short time. When he came he saw that there was much for him to do and he set himself to do it with all his heart, and he was prospering in his work, he was getting the affairs of the church into good shape. . . . Mr. Burns' memory will be cherished long by not a few in this town. His gentle, unassuming and yet manly bearing secured him many friends. His removal is felt to be a great loss and his place will not soon be filled."

Over his grave a simple stone was raised bearing this inscription:

In Memoriam
REV. ANTHONY BURNS
The fugitive slave of the Boston riots, 1854.
Pastor of Zion Baptist Church.
Born in Virginia, May 31, 1834.
Died in the Triumph of Faith in St. Catharines,
July 27th, A.D. 1862.

Rev. R. A. Ball, formerly pastor of the B.M.E. Church in St. Catharines, but now living in Toronto, has supplied some details of the personal appearance of Anthony Burns. Mr. Ball writes:

"He was a fine-looking man, tall and broad-shouldered, but with a slight stoop, indicating a weak chest. His colour was light brown. He was a fine speaker and was considered to be well educated. He was unmarried and very popular with both the white people and the people of his own race."

Miss Ball, wife of Rev. Mr. Ball, played the organ at the memorial service that was held in the church of which Anthony Burns had been pastor.

In November, 1918, a number of interesting letters and documents connected with the Burns case were sold by the Libbie Book Auction House of Boston. One of these was an offer of \$500 from P. T. Barnum, the showman, if Burns would tell his story to the museum visitors for five weeks. The offer, however, was not accepted. A life of Anthony Burns, by Charles Emery Stevens, was printed in Boston in 1856, too early, of course, to have any details of the later years in Canada. Proceeds of this book appear to have aided Burns in securing his education at Oberlin, for there is a letter written in 1856 in which he says: "I have bought and sold nearly a hundred of these books in Oberlin."

In the same letter, referring to the presidential election of 1856, in which Buchanan was successful, he says: "I have been waiting to see which way the nation would turn, which seems to have turned together over the left. I suppose, sir, that the work of hell will go on in the south."

James Ford Rhodes, the historian, in summarizing the Anthony Burns case, says:

"To this complexion had it come at last. In a community celebrated all over the world for the respect it yielded to law, and for obedience to those clothed with authority; in a community where the readiness of all citizens to assist the authorities had struck intelligent Europeans with

amazement,—it now required to execute a law a large body of deputy marshals, the whole force of the city police, 1,140 soldiers with muskets loaded, supplied with eleven rounds of powder and ball and furnished with a cannon loaded with grapeshot. If anything were needed to heighten the strangeness of the situation, it may be found in the fact that the marshal's deputies were taken from the dregs of society, for no reputable citizen would serve as a slave catcher.

"As the men of Boston and the men of New England reflected on what had taken place, they were persuaded, as they had never been before, that something was rotten in the United States, and that these events boded some strange eruption to our state. Nor was the significance of the transaction entirely lost upon the South."

"The tables under the Fugitive Slave Law are beginning at last to turn against the law and in favor of humanity," Seward wrote to his wife under date of May 28, 1854. "There is deep and painful suspense here."

Whittier, the poet, was moved to verse, and his poem, "The Rendition," commemorates the Anthony Burns affair. It may be found in his collected works:

I heard the train's shrill whistle call,
I saw an earnest look beseech,
And rather by that look than speech
My neighbour told me all.

And as I thought of Liberty
Marched handcuffed down that sworded street,
The solid earth beneath my feet
Reeled fluid as the sea.

I felt a sense of bitter loss—
Shame, tearless grief and stifling wrath,
And leathing fear, as if my path
A serpent stretched across.

All love of home, all pride of place,
All generous confidence and trust
Sank smothering in that deep disgust
And anguish of disgrace.

Down on my native hills of June,
And home's green quiet, hiding all,
Fell sudden darkness like the fall
Of midnight upon noon.

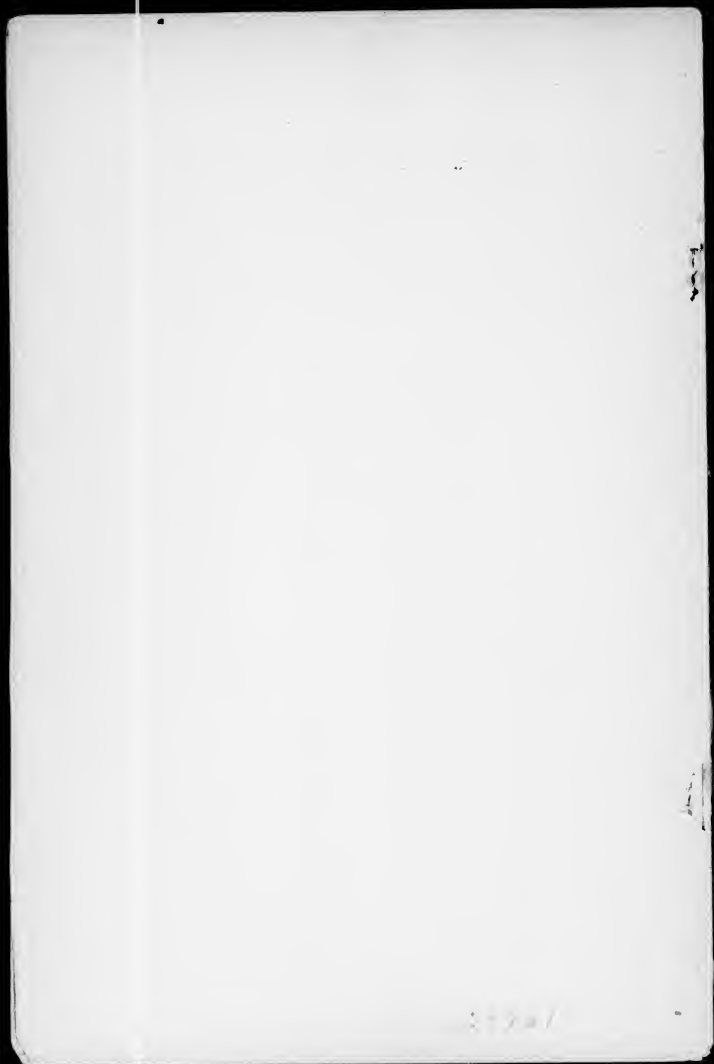
And Law, an unloosed maniac, strong,
Blood-drunk, through the blackness trod,
Horse-shouting in the ear of God
The blasphemy of wrong.

"O Mother, from thy memories proud,
Thy old renown, dear Commonwealth,
Lend this dead air a breeze of health,
And smite with tears this cloud.

"Mother of Freedom, wise and brave,
Rise awful in thy strength," I said;
Ah me! I spake but to the dead;
I stood upon her grave.

¹Rhodes, History of the United States, Vol. I, pp. 505-6.

²Life of Seward, Vol. II, p. 230. Cited by Rhodes.



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